

# Deterrence in the Israeli-Iranian Strategic Standoff

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One of the central concerns of current US foreign policy is that Iran will develop a nuclear weapons capability which it could use to threaten the security of other regional states. This fear exists despite the declassification of a 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) “key judgments” summary stating that the Iranian nuclear weapons development program was frozen in 2003 and did not appear to have been restarted as of the publication of the report.<sup>1</sup> In elaborating on this NIE in early 2008, the then-Director of National Intelligence, Admiral Michael McConnell, told Congress that he regretted the wording of the document because he felt it left the erroneous impression that Iran had given up on obtaining nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup>

The entire history of the Iranian nuclear technology program, including previous efforts to keep the enrichment effort secret, suggests that Tehran will almost certainly continue to pursue a nuclear weapons capability despite some reassuring factors noted in the 2007 NIE. The NIE itself acknowledges the existence of a secret program, simply by noting its apparent suspension. Iran’s continuing and declared focus on nuclear enrichment is particularly disturbing since the development of a large-scale enrichment capability is the most technologically challenging aspect of the effort to construct a nuclear weapon (despite the alternative uses of this technology for peaceful purposes).<sup>3</sup> Additionally, according to a variety of public sources, the Israeli intelligence agencies believe that Iran has made greater progress in moving toward a nuclear weapons capability than is reflected in the NIE or Admiral McConnell’s recent comments.<sup>4</sup> British and French leaders have been sufficiently concerned by Iranian activities to issue strong warnings about potential problems from nuclear adventurism.<sup>5</sup>

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The questions that arise are how dangerous will an Iran armed with nuclear weapons be, and what will be the primary targets for Iranian nuclear weapons should Tehran obtain such a capability? In particular, the incendiary rhetoric of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad suggests that it is reasonable to wonder if there is a high risk that Iran will attack Israel with nuclear weapons during some future period of high Israeli-Iranian tension (such as might emerge out of a new Lebanon war similar to that of 2006). A related question is what can Israel do about such a situation?

This article forecasts a serious chance of failure in the current American and global efforts to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons regardless of whether such attempts are pursued through the use of economic and political sanctions or air strikes. It is doubtful that either option can guarantee the end of the Iranian nuclear program for reasons to be discussed later. The more radical option of air strikes has a significant potential to undermine other western goals in the Middle East, including stabilizing Iraq, while failing to do much more than delay the Iranian weapons program for a few years at best. An alternative possibility is that Israel as a potential Iranian strategic adversary will be able to establish a system of deterrence and missile defense based on a combination of technology it already possesses or is developing. Such a system would seriously limit (perhaps even overcome) the chances of a successful Iranian strike against Israel, while raising the cost of even an unsuccessful attack to apocalyptic levels for the Tehran regime. Ideally, Israeli-sponsored deterrence will not have to be maintained indefinitely if the United States and Europe can generate a diplomatic strategy for managing Iranian power, especially if a more moderate leadership eventually emerges in Iran. In this regard, some (but not all) Israeli leaders have not ruled out the possibility that the United States can achieve important diplomatic gains that will benefit Israel in negotiations with Iran.<sup>6</sup>

### *Israeli Concerns Regarding Iran*

Israel has a unique historical legacy making it especially sensitive to military threats from hostile powers such as Iran. The Nazi Holocaust in particular has given many Israelis an enduring sense of vulnerability, while Israel's limited acceptance by other states within the Middle East

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has contributed to an ongoing sense of insecurity.<sup>7</sup> The Israelis have also had several traumatic experiences with intelligence failures and their own complacency about the capabilities of hostile forces. The most dramatic of these intelligence setbacks was the failure to detect Egyptian and Syrian plans for a surprise attack in October 1973 until the eve of that war.<sup>8</sup> More recently, many Israeli citizens have criticized their government's conduct of the July-August 2006 war with Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon, although these problems are generally viewed as a failure in planning by the senior leadership and not simply an intelligence failure. A number of informed observers believe that Israel did not lose this war, but very few Israelis would maintain that they won the conflict by obtaining the goals Israeli leaders had announced.<sup>9</sup> Rather, Israelis have tended to express disillusionment with what they view as the limited successes of the Lebanon campaign as well as the ability of Hezbollah to disrupt normal life in northern Israel through a campaign of attacks using the small but deadly Katusha rockets.<sup>10</sup>

Currently, as Israel considers its security posture within the region, Iran has assumed a role of greater importance in strategic thought and military planning. Israeli concerns about Tehran have been serious for some time but escalated as Iran became increasingly powerful and assertive within the region, especially since the destruction of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Additionally, President Ahmadinejad has made a series of reprehensible statements denying the Holocaust, calling for the elimination of Israel, and the transfer of its Jewish inhabitants to Europe, North America, or Alaska.<sup>11</sup> Following his election in 2005, Ahmadinejad attempted to present himself as the face of the regime despite the limited powers of his office. While the worst of Ahmadinejad's statements were made following publication of Danish cartoons ridiculing the Prophet Mohammed, such statements remain deeply worrisome to Israelis with some believing his extremism signals an existential threat.<sup>12</sup> Ahmadinejad and others frequently repeat such statements, suggesting that their inflammatory rhetoric represents more than a one-time spasm of anger as a result of the Danish cartoons. The key question regarding these statements is, nevertheless, not the fact they are offensive, but do they indicate a future Iranian approach to Israel that includes a willingness to escalate to nuclear weapons in a crisis?

Interpretation of Ahmadinejad's rhetoric as a blueprint for policy would appear mistaken on the basis of the statements alone. Ahmadinejad also predicts that the "satanic power" of the United States will soon be eliminated along with Israel, although it is difficult to translate this statement into a coherent plan or a policy that is likely to achieve such a result. Nor is it clear that hinting at future Iranian military strikes against Israel is the best way to prepare for such a confrontation if Tehran truly views war as a realistic option. Conversely, extreme statements may be politically useful to help the Iranian President deflect attention and criticism from his bumbling and chaotic economic policies. These policies are leading to a growth in Iranian poverty despite the staggering increase in oil prices prior to the global economic crisis of 2008. Even before the collapse of oil prices in late 2008, Ahmadinejad's efforts to manage the Iranian economy like a patronage machine contributed to an annual 30 percent inflation rate and unemployment levels of at least 10 percent as well as substantial underemployment.<sup>13</sup> His future popularity will be placed under a severe challenge by constraints in these patronage resources should the price of oil remain at dramatically lower levels.

While the popular scenario of a suicidal regime in Tehran attacking Israel as soon as it is technologically able to do so is undoubtedly oversimplified, there are nevertheless other more plausible scenarios under which the Iranians might consider such an assault. The most likely of these scenarios involves a crisis between the United States and Iran. Since the US homeland is beyond the reach of current and projected Iranian strategic platforms, Tehran can only deter the United States with its missiles and aircraft by threatening allies or US forces deployed in the region. Israel would be a natural target for Iran in any scenario involving US-Iranian tensions, followed by a possible breakdown of deterrence and the onset of war. Additionally, if the Iranians believed some future US attack against them was actually an effort at regime change, they would be more likely to consider striking the Israelis with available systems. In such a scenario the Tehran leadership might view itself as having little to lose.

A future Iranian attack on Israel during a time of crisis is plausible, and acquiring ways of deterring such strikes should be an Israeli priority. Deterrence would successfully undermine the strategic viability of such an option for Tehran and prevent another Middle Eastern war. It is, nevertheless, important to remember that Iran has ideological and practical constraints that under current conditions would rule out such strikes in all but the most extreme circumstances. These constraints are: (1) Collateral damage from Iranian attacks could kill a staggeringly large number of Palestinians and might also harm the citizens of several Arab/Muslim

states bordering Israel. (2) Israeli strategic forces may be called upon to engage in massive retaliation for any Iranian strike. (3) Israel maintains a strong and expanding system of missile defenses and a civil defense system consisting of underground shelters and facilities. All of these factors need to be considered when determining the ways in which Tehran is already constrained and how Israel may be able to further constrain Iran.

### *Palestinian-Iranian Relations and Collateral Damage*

The Iranian leadership has attempted to portray itself as the foremost defender of the Palestinians in a variety of international and Islamic fora; it has also transferred significant amounts of money to the Palestinian Islamic group Hamas and other militant organizations in support of their struggles against Israel.<sup>14</sup> Tehran's claim of being the leading defender of the Palestinians is sometimes difficult to believe since Iran is not an Arab nation and has no bonds of ethnic kinship to the Palestinians. Nevertheless, Iran pursues this distinction with vigor and perseverance. Iranian leaders frequently speak of the suffering of the Palestinian people and the pain of Israeli occupation. President Ahmadinejad, for example, has worked to increase Iranian ties to Palestinian Islamic leaders and calls for a day "when all [Palestinian] refugees return to their home."<sup>15</sup> The Iranian leadership presents itself as more than simply anti-Israeli; in fact, it portrays itself as the most trustworthy guardian of Palestinian rights. Rather than supporting a two-state solution, Tehran seeks the elimination of Israel and its replacement by an Islamic Palestine. Ideologically, the first objective is meaningless for Tehran unless the second objective can be accomplished as well.

The issue of Palestinian collateral damage is one of the most important political and ideological issues facing Iranian strategists, although it is seldom mentioned in discussions of Iranian strategic options. It is not possible to attack Israel with nuclear weapons without also subjecting large numbers of nearby Palestinians to radioactive fallout. The lethal range of such fallout is difficult to determine since it depends upon a variety of factors including wind direction, type of explosion (ground or air), and explosive yield. Nevertheless, high lethality rates can be expected as far away as 20 miles under normal conditions.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, a number of Israel's one million Arab citizens and resident aliens live near Jewish population centers. There is a distinct possibility that Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza would also be subjected to fallout. Unfortunately for the Palestinians, Iranian targeting accuracy for its long-range missiles is highly suspect. The capabilities of these systems is quite doubtful due to ongoing

problems associated with Iran's missile testing program.<sup>17</sup> If Iranian missile accuracy is off even slightly, the Palestinians, Jordanians, Lebanese, or Syrians may pay a higher price for an Iranian nuclear strike than the Israelis. This problem is further compounded because, unlike Israel, none of the Arab countries has a modern civil defense system to shelter populations, and certainly no ballistic missile defense program. While it is conceivable that Iran might accept the deaths of a large number of Muslims, such a decision would not be taken lightly by Iranian leadership and is not consistent with their nonstop statements of concern for the Palestinians.

Additionally, some of the leadership in Tehran could be expected to have reservations about any attack on Israel that might risk harm to Jerusalem, the third holiest city in Islam. Iranian rhetoric on restoring Jerusalem to the Palestinians is often intense and directly relates to Tehran's claims of leadership of the Muslim world. In particular, the Iranian leadership treats the Jerusalem issue as a concern that transcends Palestinian national rights and is better understood as an Islamic issue. Iran seeks Muslim sovereignty over Jerusalem and not its destruction. A belief that it is acceptable to destroy the city and kill a large number of Muslims is inconsistent with Iranian rhetoric and the teachings of Ayatollah Ruhullah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic. Khomeini expressed public anger regarding what he called the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem and supported spurious claims that Israel had attempted to destroy the al Aqsa mosque in 1969 when a fire set by a deranged person caused serious damage.<sup>18</sup> In the headier days of the Iran-Iraq War various Iranian leaders claimed that the Islamic Republic would "liberate Jerusalem" after it finished with Iraq. Khomeini also established "Jerusalem Day," as a time to call for the destruction of Israel and the conquest of Jerusalem.

Supporters of Khomeini's radicalism, such as President Ahmadinejad, continue to call for the "liberation" of Jerusalem, and there is little doubt that the Iranian leadership embraces the rhetoric of confrontation with Israel in an attempt to aid Palestine. There is, however, considerable uncertainty that the leadership would be willing to attack with nuclear weapons in such a manner as to preclude the establishment of a Palestinian state and the ruin of Jerusalem. The Iranian fear of collateral damage and Muslim deaths weighs more heavily on select Iranian leaders than on others, but it is clearly a factor that Tehran needs to take into account in any strategic calculations.

### *Deterrence*

Deterrence by Israel is the second major problem facing Iran's strategic planners. The Israelis are believed to have significant numbers of deliv-

erable nuclear weapons that they would be willing to use against Iran in any nuclear confrontation. While the details of Israel's strategic weapons are carefully guarded, most Middle Easterners tend to believe that the Israeli stockpile is large and diverse—a major factor in the matter of deterrence, as it is based on such perceptions. These assessments of Israeli nuclear prowess are occasionally reinforced by statements in the western media or by western leaders related to Israel's military strength. A striking example of such a statement was the May 2003 release by former US President Jimmy Carter. At a news conference in London, Carter stated, "The United States has more than 12,000 nuclear weapons, [Russia] has about the same, Great Britain and France have several hundred, and Israel has 150 or more."<sup>19</sup> On a more analytical level, a November 2007 study by Anthony Cordesman from the Center for Strategic and International Studies suggests that Israel may have the capability to destroy the Iranian nation-state without help from any other nation, relying solely upon the accuracy and yield of its nuclear weapons.<sup>20</sup> Occasionally the Israelis take steps to remind Tehran of the potential for retaliation. In June 2008, more than 100 Israeli fighter aircraft participated in a military exercise over the eastern Mediterranean Sea and Greece; an exercise that mimicked the conditions of a strike on Iran.<sup>21</sup>

Even if Tehran were not discouraged by the apparently daunting possibility of annihilation by Israel, the Iranians are keenly aware of the relationship between the United States and Israel. Right or wrong, many Iranian leaders believe that an attack on Israel would lead to US retaliation against Iran.<sup>22</sup> This conclusion is occasionally reinforced by US political leaders. For example, in April 2008, then-Senator Hillary Clinton stated during the presidential campaign, "In the next ten years during which they [Iran] might foolishly consider launching an attack on Israel, we would be able to totally obliterate them."<sup>23</sup> While this statement was made at the height of a political campaign, the use of the term "obliterate" is not subtle, and the Iranian leadership could hardly have welcomed President Obama's decision to select Senator Clinton as Secretary of State.

The idea that Iran might undertake nuclear strikes against Israel without regard for Israeli counterstrike capabilities is sometimes explained as "militant messianism and speculative apocalypticism," the supposition being that an "end of days" scenario can be facilitated by attacking Israel (as an enemy of Islam) with nuclear weapons.<sup>24</sup> This fear is based on the fact that a variety of the Iranian regime members refer to Shiaism's "Hidden Imam" and pray for his return as the Mahdi (messiah). They also endorse Iran's virulent anti-Israeli rhetoric. Israeli scholar Ze'ev Maghen, a specialist on Iranian Shiaism, has disputed this interpretation of mainstream

Iranian theology, noting that such an otherworldly view has not been incorporated into the foreign or domestic policies of the Islamic Republic. Indeed, the victories of the Iranian revolutionaries in overthrowing the Shah and protecting the revolution required a leadership that could think in pragmatic terms rather than religious visions. According to Maghen, “For Iran to launch a nuclear weapon on any target would mean the end of its precious this-worldly ‘messianic’ dream of spreading Islam across the planet under the aegis of Twelver Shiaism; it would mean the end of Iran.”<sup>25</sup>

Iran, despite the zealotry and bombast of its leaders, has shown a consistent ability to conduct rational, interest-based national defense and foreign policy that avoids deliberately provoking nuclear war. In 2003, for example, Tehran undertook serious efforts at rapprochement with the United States due to a fear of US attacks following Saddam’s ouster in Iraq. A number of Iranian leaders have clearly demonstrated that they are content to obtain status using power politics and the mechanics of patronage and corruption rather than applying the nature of otherworldly messianic thought. Former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, a billionaire who currently heads two powerful government organizations, the Expediency Council and the Assembly of Experts, is an example of someone who has a reputation for accumulating personal wealth by devious means.<sup>26</sup> Although he was a key lieutenant of Ayatollah Khomeini in the early years of the Islamic Republic, Rafsanjani, like other aging revolutionaries, is not above seeking rewards in this world.

### *Israeli Defenses*

Another factor that complicates Iranian strategic planning is Israel’s expanding missile defense program, composed of the Israeli Arrow system and the US-produced Patriot PAC-2 system. The only Iranian weapon systems that may be able to penetrate Israeli defenses are long-range ballistic missiles, currently undergoing development and testing. Iranian aircraft and seaborne systems will almost certainly be unable to penetrate Israeli fighter aircraft and other defenses.<sup>27</sup> Missile defense is one of the most important guarantees of Israel’s future security, although it is laden with technological as well as command and control challenges.

Currently, the Israelis seek to expand their existing missile defenses into an elaborate, layered system of protection, capable of defending against any potential foe or array of threats. This level of protection involves a number of different interceptor systems designed to destroy incoming ballistic missiles at various ranges and altitudes. The idea is for the longest range, high-altitude defensive missiles (Arrow 3, as yet undeployed)

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to destroy all or most of the incoming systems far from Israel. “Leakers” from this first line of defense would then be intercepted by shorter-range interceptors, including the Arrow 2 and the Patriot PAC-2 and PAC-3.<sup>28</sup>

The backbone of this defensive umbrella is the Arrow interceptor missile system, which has been under development since the mid-1980s. The development of this particular defensive system has received an especially high priority as a result of the Iraqi missile strikes against Israel in 1991. Thirty-nine Iraqi extended-range Scud (al Hussein) missiles were fired at Israel, some of which penetrated Israel’s Patriot defenses and hit targets with their conventional warheads.<sup>29</sup> At that time, the Arrow was not yet operational. Lessons from that conflict served to dramatically intensify Israeli interest in missile defense.

While there is probably no such thing as leakproof missile defense, the protection of a small nation with a limited number of targets is much more achievable than protecting a large span of territory such as the United States. One of the major concerns for the Israelis who are developing missile defenses is the potential for Iran to develop more sophisticated missiles having penetration aids capable of spoofing defensive systems. Israel’s technological edge and its ongoing collaboration with the United States regarding missile defense are major factors in the effort to defeat Iranian technology. Although Israel’s missile defense system appears robust, even its strongest advocates point to the fact that it has never been tested under combat conditions. This fact is responsible for an element of uncertainty about the system’s ability to protect Israel from an actual missile attack. The legacy of the missile strikes from Operation Desert Storm remains a disturbing precedent.

As noted earlier, Israeli missile defenses are backed by a strong and viable civil defense program. This civil defense effort consists of a network of shelters and programs supervised and administered by the Israel Defense Force’s Homefront Command and the National Emergency Authority.<sup>30</sup> As such, it serves as a final line of defense for the Israeli public and is taken quite seriously. Many of the drills assume an importance unheard of in other societies. Israel’s largest civil defense exercise, “Turning Point,” occurred 6 to 10 April 2008 and involved simulated attacks on various cities, the emergency impression of private vehicles, and the movement of the Prime Minister and

his staff to an underground shelter.<sup>31</sup> The Prime Minister and the Cabinet were fully involved in the exercise and in keeping with the scenario had to make a number of decisions based on the simulated attacks and numerous casualties.

### ***Sanctions and Preemptive Attack***

The United Nations (UN) Security Council has already applied three sets of sanctions against Iran for its failure to meet requirements of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to which Iran is a party. These sanctions, along with other more comprehensive measures by the United States and various western nations, have inflicted economic pain on Iran but have not caused Tehran to moderate its pursuit of nuclear technology.<sup>32</sup> While the United States has strongly advocated additional UN sanctions against Iran, it has found little support from such major powers as Russia and China, both also members of the Security Council. To the dismay of many, Iran already has received significant quantities of nuclear technology from a variety of sources, to include Pakistan's rogue scientist A. Q. Khan.<sup>33</sup> The reality of the situation is that even an ironclad embargo of nuclear technology would not halt the Iranian nuclear weapons program since the Iranians have already obtained older, but still viable, technology capable of facilitating the enrichment of uranium.

There is also a question of motivation. The Iranian leadership feels that it has sufficient reasons to pursue nuclear weapons based on their need to protect the regime. Along with North Korea and Iraq, the regime in Tehran was designated as part of the "Axis of Evil" in 2002 by President George W. Bush. Iraq, a nonnuclear power, was invaded by the United States and its regime toppled in 2003. North Korea, which is believed to have a nuclear weapon, was not invaded or even threatened with invasion. A number of observers have concluded that the United States was deterred by Pyongyang. Adding to this dichotomy is the fact that the Iranian government claimed it was cooperating with the United States with regard to Afghanistan at the time, and that Iran's help was significant in US efforts to stabilize Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup> The US administration's rhetorical emphasis on the "Bush Doctrine" and "preemptive war," when followed by the invasion of Iraq, created great tension in Tehran. The need to deter the United States became an urgent objective for Iran's leadership that was determined to safeguard the Islamic regime and prevent the establishment of a western-style government in the Middle East.

Probably the most certain and direct strategy for halting Iran's nuclear program would be to attack its nuclear and missile facilities. A number of these facilities have been identified by Israeli and western intelligence agencies, although the success of such a strategy is extremely doubtful. This

option, however satisfying psychologically, is unlikely to serve US or Israeli long-term interests, short of preventing a near-term missile launch by Tehran. The United States might not choose to support such a direct attack by the Israelis, and it is doubtful that Israel would undertake an attack without American support. The United States and the world as a whole are currently coping with an economic recession. A new war in the Middle East would certainly accelerate negative economic trends, possibly plunging the world into even greater economic turmoil. An attack on Iran would undoubtedly cause severe oil shortages and spike the price of oil to levels that would cripple western economies, complicating the war's economic aftermath.<sup>35</sup>

Many Iraqis and particularly the Shia Iraqis would view such an attack with unbridled hostility, with the majority of Muslim nations assuming that Israel was operating in collusion with the United States. Under such circumstances, large-scale demonstrations against American interests would likely occur, with radicals such as Muqtada al Sadr regaining some of their crumbling credibility. The prospects for the survival of an Iraqi government willing to work with the United States after any attack against Iran would be slim, with the chances of anarchy high. The great many of the Iraqi Shias who are willing to at least tolerate a US presence in their country would have sufficient reason to re-think that choice. Most Iraqis would be offended by any US action, including abetting an Israeli strike on Iran, that could be viewed as a violation of the painfully negotiated US Status of Forces Agreement with Iraq.

The United States would be viewed by most of the Muslim world and globally as complicit in any attack on Iran regardless of whether it took part in the actual planning or not. In order to effectively attack Iranian nuclear facilities, large numbers of Israeli aircraft would have to repeatedly transit the airspace of Arab nations for a period of days if not weeks. Iraq would be one of the most useful countries in providing air routes. Arab nations would publicly deny they had made their airspace available to the Israelis, but Iraq would find itself, because of geographic proximity, the least credible. According to Giora Eiland, the former head of the Israeli National Security Council, "Israel cannot carry out such a strike [against Iran] without coordination with the Americans so long as they're in Iraq."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, even a casual glance at a map of the region would suggest he is correct. As the result of any attack, Iran would find its political standing strongly enhanced, and efforts to isolate Tehran diplomatically or economically would collapse.

Any attack on Iran would give the current Tehran government legitimacy, especially the hard-liners, as Iranian citizens closed ranks in the face of an external threat. The Iranians have long memories, and the political viability of extremist leaders could be extended for decades following

such an attack.<sup>37</sup> This perpetuation of extremist ideologies would be another unfortunate result of the attacks. The voices of reformist leaders such as former President Mohammad Khatami would in all likelihood be silenced. In the past Khatami has even taken on hard-liners such as Mr. Ahmadinejad. In response to Ahmadinejad's statements related to the Holocaust, Khatami countered, "We should speak out if even a single Jew is killed. Don't forget that one of the crimes of Hitler, Nazism, and German National Socialism was the massacre of innocent people, among them many Jews."<sup>38</sup>

Some political leaders and analysts have questioned the technical capability of Israel to destroy the Iranian nuclear facilities. Experts suggest that the task is beyond current Israeli capabilities.<sup>39</sup> Israel, they maintain, might be able to conduct a raid, but not an extended air campaign. Outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert also hinted that this might be the case. In a far-reaching interview he addressed the question of Israeli military action against Iran: "One senses a megalomania and a loss of proportion in the things said here about Iran. We are a country that has lost a sense of proportion. We are a country that has lost a sense of scale."<sup>40</sup> If these assessments are correct, Israel would be capable of initiating a war with Iran but would need the United States' help in concluding it, something the United States may choose not to do. In any event, relationships between Israel and America would be severely tested by such events.

### ***Conclusion***

The most plausible reason for Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons is not to destroy Israel, but to deter the United States from any thoughts of regime change directed against Tehran. Correspondingly, the most likely reason for Iran to attack Israel would be in response to a US threat against Iran. Under such a scenario, the Iranian leadership would judge they have nothing to lose since their own removal was imminent. Under any other scenario, Iranian leaders would more than likely exercise restraint, hoping to save themselves and their country. It should never be forgotten that Israel, despite its military advantages, is also vulnerable to attack from Iran. Likewise, it cannot be assumed that the threat of casualties to the Palestinians and Arab nations from collateral damage will be enough to prevent an Iranian attack on Israel. The prospect of an Iranian attack against Israel remains at some abstract level, although such a threat is exceptionally remote as previously noted in this article.

If an Iranian attack on Israel is unlikely, but still possible, the critical question then becomes what level of insecurity are the Israelis willing to accept in exchange for avoiding the negative costs associated with a strike

against Iran? Resorting to military force in a quest for absolute security can often undermine the very objective one is seeking. In the case of Israel and Iran there appear to be much better options. Israeli technology reinforced by US assistance is far in advance of Iranian capabilities, and their investment in emerging technologies is further widening that gap. The pursuit of this strategy means that US efforts to delay Iranian missile and nuclear development give Israel additional time to further enhance its technological edge. Such a strategy requires more than simply exercising diplomatic skills with Iran's suppliers and nuclear supporters. In some cases, the United States will need to work closely with Iran's trading partners to gain their assistance in limiting support for Iranian nuclear and military programs.

Additionally, US-Iranian initiatives hold the potential for aiding both the Israelis and Iranians in avoiding a cataclysmic clash. American diplomatic engagement with Iran could help in reducing the influence of Tehran's hard-liners, who successfully were able to portray the Bush Administration and its allies as inherently threatening to Iran. This portrayal contrasts sharply with the Obama Administration's more benign reputation for seeking diplomatic solutions to strategic challenges. President Obama's reputation and a new administration can be useful as an additional source of diplomatic leverage. Should the United States fail in efforts at diplomatic progress with Iran, it would be in a much stronger position to seek additional UN economic sanctions against Tehran. President Obama could then easily claim that his Administration honestly sought to improve relations with Tehran but was thwarted by Iran's unreasonable behavior related to the nuclear issue. A US call for increased sanctions would then have greater credibility with the American public and the global community, even hurting the legitimacy of the Iranian regime's position with its citizens and supporters.

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